

# Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has largely stayed out of the news lately, which, considering how it earned most of its press in the 1990s, is a good thing. The decade-long civil war garnered regular headlines thanks to widespread atrocities committed by rebel soldiers; many of them not yet in their teens.

But oh how things have changed. Peace was declared in 2002 and Sierra Leone has blossomed. Life has largely returned to normal and today it is one of West Africa's safest destinations. Reconstruction continues apace, investors are arriving in droves and travellers are trickling in.

With some of the most perfect palm-lined sands on the continent, it won't be long before Sierra Leone takes its place in Europe's packaged beach-holiday scene; but for now, visitors can have the surf outside the capital pretty much to themselves. And after a day in the sun, Freetown offers everything you need for a night out. Travel to the provinces, where roads are often abysmal and facilities usually basic, remains in the realm of the adventurous, but with vibrant culture and wonderful parks, the rewards are many.

To be sure, Sierra Leone still has problems. It ranked second-last in the UN's most recent Human Development Index, unemployment remains high and the education system hasn't met expectations, but most locals hang on to their optimism.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 72,325 sq km
- **ATMs** Only work with local bankcards
- **Borders** Liberia and Guinea open
- **Budget** US\$15 to US\$25 per day
- **Capital** Freetown
- **Languages** English, Krio, Mende, Temne
- **Money** Leone; US\$1 = Le2940
- **Population** 6 million
- **Seasons** Dry (mid-November to mid-May); wet (mid-May to mid-November)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 232; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visas** Required by everyone except most West African citizens



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Beach bumming** (p506) Tread Freetown peninsula's sandy shores, which have few peers in Africa.
- **Tiwai Island** (p508) Venture into one of the best places on the continent to see primates.
- **Outamba-Kilimi National Park** (p507) Track big mammals on foot or by canoe.
- **Freetown** (p502) Experience the variety of this frenetic city, which has several historic sites, interesting markets and anything-goes nightlife.
- **Mount Bintumani** (p507) Dare a remote and rewarding journey to the summit.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Sierra Leone is hot and very humid. The coast gets up to 3250mm precipitation per year and the wet season stretches from mid-May to mid-November – July and August are the wettest months, except in the far south, which gets a bit of a break then.

The best time to visit is November, after the rains and before the dusty harmattan winds blow in. During the rainy season, washed out roads make travel to some destinations difficult or impossible, though there are some sunny days at the beginning and end. The further you go into the dry season the more heat you'll have to endure and the less green you'll see in the countryside.

## ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Look around Freetown (p502) and get in some quality beach time further south.
- **One Week** Many people spend their whole week at the beaches. Although it might be hard to pull yourself off the sand, it's worth taking a few days upcountry to visit Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary (p508) and a town or two. If you're here for the wildlife you can get to both Tiwai and Outamba-Kilimi National Park (p507) and still have a day at the beach.
- **Two Weeks** You can see most of the country without travelling too fast. It also gives you enough time to add scaling Mt Bintumani (p507) to your itinerary.

## HISTORY

Sierra Leone has had an eventful 500 years. The country was a major player in the beginning and end of the slave trade, but in-

## HOW MUCH?

- **Small Temne basket** US\$2.50
- **100km bush taxi ride** US\$7.50
- **Bottle of palm wine** US\$0.30
- **Two lapa (about 4 sq yards) of gara cloth** US\$12.50
- **A night at a music show** Free

## LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.25
- **1.5L of bottled water** US\$1.25
- **Bottle of Star beer** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$7.50
- **Fry fry with egg** US\$0.40

equalities between the Krio freed slaves who developed the modern nation and indigenous peoples caused bitterness and conflict. Krios have long ceased to rule the roost in Sierra Leone, but the same old inequalities between the Freetown elite and the poor of the interior remain alive.

The American slave trade was effectively launched from Freetown in 1560, and by the 18th century Portuguese and British trading and slaving settlements lined the coast. In the late 1700s, freed slaves from places such as North America were brought to the new settlement of Freetown. Soon after, Britain abolished slavery and Sierra Leone became a British colony. Many subsequent settlers were liberated from slaving ships intercepted by the British navy. These people became known as Krios and assumed an English lifestyle together with an air of superiority.

But things didn't all run smoothly in this brave new world. Black and white settlers dabbling in the slave trade, disease, rebellion and attacks by the French were all characteristics of 19th-century Sierra Leone. Most importantly, indigenous people were discriminated against and in 1898 a ferocious uprising by the Mende began, ostensibly in opposition to a hut tax.

## Diamonds Are Forever

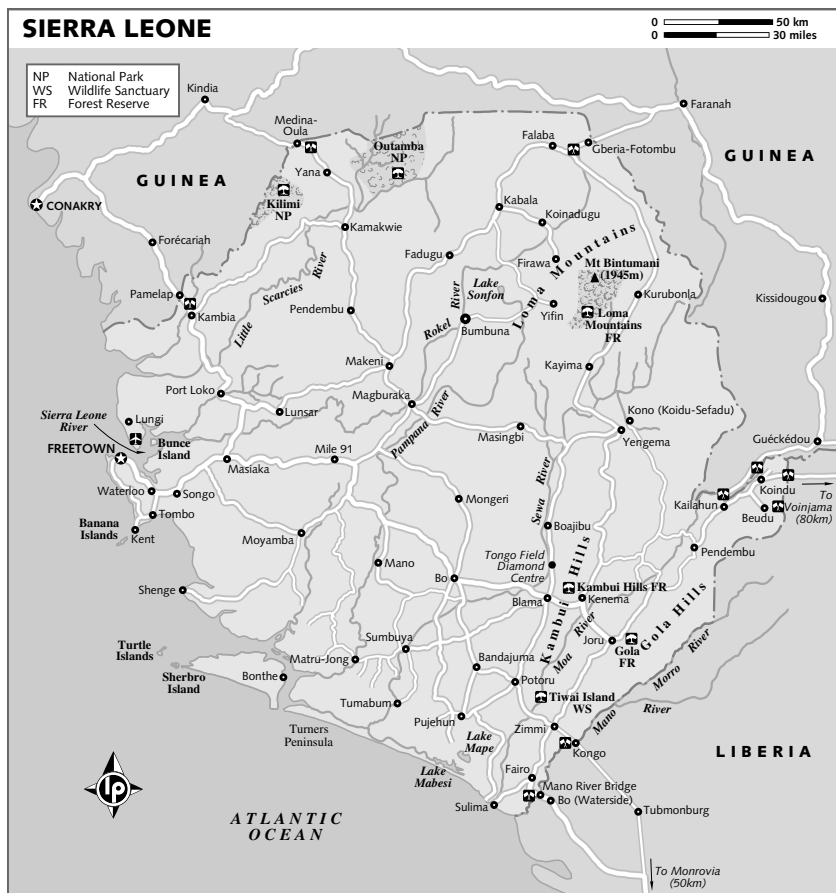
Independence came in 1961, but the 1960s and 1970s were characterised by coups (once there were three in one year, an all-African record), a shift of power to the indigenous

Mende and Temne peoples, and the establishment of a one-party state (which lasted into the 1980s). By the early 1990s the country was saddled with a shambolic economy and rampant corruption. Then the civil war began.

It's entirely possible that buried in the depths of Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was a desire to end the corruption and abuses of power committed by ruling military-backed elites in Freetown, who had turned the country into a basket case. Many RUF founding members were also involved with Charles Taylor's conquest of neighbouring Liberia and had his support. But any high ideals were quickly forgotten, replaced by a ferocious desire for Sierra Leone's diamond and gold fields, with looting, rob-

bery, rape, mutilation and summary execution all tools of the RUF's trade. While their troops plundered to make ends meet, Charles Taylor and the RUF's leaders enriched themselves from diamonds smuggled into Liberia.

The Sierra Leone government was pretty ineffective and tried using South African mercenaries against the RUF who, bolstered by disaffected army elements and Liberian irregulars, were making gains across the country. In 1996, elections were held and Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was declared president, but a year later, after peace talks had brought hope then despair, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) grabbed control of government and decided to share power with the RUF. By this time factionalisation and



desertion on all sides had led to an utter free-for-all, with the civilian population suffering atrocities at every turn.

## Hopes & Fears

In March 1998 Ecomog, a Nigerian-led peace-keeping force, retook Freetown and reinstated Kabbah. Some sort of peace held until January 1999, when the RUF and AFRC launched 'Operation No Living Thing'. The ensuing carnage in and around Freetown killed 6000 people, mutilated many more (lopping a limb off was a RUF calling card) and prompted the government to sign the Lomé Peace Agreement. A massive UN peacekeeping mission (Unamsil) was deployed, but 10 months later it came under attack from the RUF. Three hundred UN troops were abducted, but as the RUF closed in on Freetown in mid-2000 the British government deployed 1000 paratroopers and an aircraft carrier, ostensibly to allow for UN reinforcements. In effect this was to prevent a massacre and shift the balance of power to Kabbah's government and UN forces. By February 2002 the RUF was disarmed and its leaders captured. Free and fair elections were held a few months later; Kabbah was re-elected and the RUF's political wing soundly defeated.

## Sierra Leone Today

Unamsil became the largest and most expensive peacekeeping mission in UN history, and also one of its most effective. Peace has blossomed and nowhere is out of bounds these days. In 2002 an independent war-crimes court and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission opened shop, and Unamsil began the withdrawal of its 17,500 personnel. The last soldiers departed at the end of 2005 and were replaced by Uniosl, the UN Integrated Office for Sierra Leone, which will promote government accountability, reinforce human rights, oversee development, and prepare the nation for 2007 elections. Sankoh died of natural causes before the courts could weigh in on his fate, but Charles Taylor was arrested in 2006 and now sits in a cell in The Hague awaiting trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity. He is the first African president to face this fate.

Sierra Leone faces huge social and economic problems, and the slow progress on these has frustrated people, but there remains abundant hope.

## CULTURE

When Sierra Leoneans get together, talk always seems to turn to politics, development and corruption – the three largely being one and the same in Sierra Leone. The war did a lot to foster nationalism: everyone knows they are in the same boat, and politicians of all stripes get chastised for the sluggish progress. But a line is being drawn between those who only see rough seas ahead and others who fear a sinking ship. Those who subscribe to the latter constitute a small, but growing, percentage.

The Mendes and Temnes operate a system of secret societies responsible for maintaining culture and tradition. If you see young children with their faces painted white, you'll know that they're in the process of being initiated.

## PEOPLE

The two largest of the 18 tribal groups, the Temnes of the north and Mendes of the south, each compose about one-third of the population. Krios, most living in Freetown, constitute less than 2% of the population, but a large percentage of the professional class.

About 60% of Sierra Leoneans are Muslim, although there have been many converts to Christianity in recent years. Most of the 30% who are Christian live in the south. Traditional beliefs remain close to the heart of most Sierra Leoneans.

## ARTS & CRAFTS

Sierra Leone is known for its fabrics, especially country cloth, a coarse, naturally dyed cotton material, and *gara*, a thin tie-dyed or batik-printed sheet. Distinctive Temne basketry is made in the north but sold throughout the country.

Sierra Leone's principal contribution to the world of music is palm-wine music, known locally as *maringa*, but it has been on the decline since its best-known exponent, SE Rogie, passed away in 1994. Sierra Leone's traditional dances are some of the most animated in West Africa, though opportunities for watching them are rare. Independence Day is your best bet. Mende society is one of the few where women do masked dances.

The war spawned many harrowing books, fiction and nonfiction, and Graham Greene's colonial-era classic *The Heart of the Matter* is set in Freetown. Dozens of poets share their work online at [www.sierra-leone.org/poetry.html](http://www.sierra-leone.org/poetry.html).

## ENVIRONMENT

Sierra Leone's coast is lined with cracking beaches, mangrove swamps and islands. Coastal plains, the mountainous Freetown peninsula being the exception, lead inland for considerable distance. Central Sierra Leone has sweeping plains, while in the northeast are the Loma Mountains, which have Mt Bintumani (1945m) at the heart. About 30% of the country is forest and much primary rainforest has gone, though large patches remain in the south and east.

Outamba-Kilimi National Park (which still has elephants) in the north and Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary (incredible for primates) in the south are worth a visit, but don't expect eco-lodges and ice-cold beers – get the latest on these and other less-developed reserves from the **Conservation Society of Sierra Leone** (☎ 022-229716; cscs\_03@yahoo.com; 2 Pyke St, Freetown).

## FOOD & DRINK

Sierra Leone is known for its cuisine, and every town has at least one *cookery* (basic eating house) serving tasty, filling *chop* (meals). Rice is the staple and *plasas* (pounded potato or cassava leaves, cooked with palm oil and

fish or beef) is the most common sauce. Seafood is a real treat in the capital.

Other typical Sierra Leonean dishes include okra sauce, groundnut stew and pepper soup. Street food, such as fried chicken, roasted corn, beef sticks, and fry fry (simple sandwiches), is also good and easy to find.

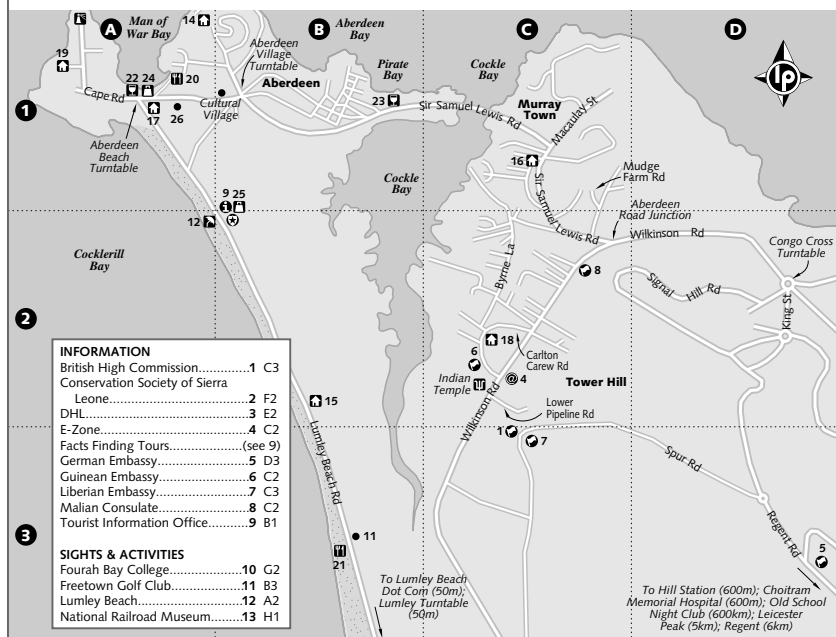
The top-selling beer, Star, is reasonable. *Poyo* (palm wine) is light and fruity, but getting used to the smell and the wildlife floating in your cup takes a while. The spicy ginger beer sold on the streets is a nonalcoholic alternative, but be leery because the water is rarely boiled.

## FREETOWN

☎ 022 / pop 1 million

Reminders of the recent violence are fading in Sierra Leone's capital, but evidence of its growing pains is never far away. Traffic jams last from morning until night, the local government seems to have largely given up on rubbish collection, and there hasn't been reliable power since the 1980s.

## GREATER FREETOWN



But, despite the difficulties, Freetown feels less threatening than other large West African cities, and the beautiful setting compensates for the chaos. Besides, if you spend all your time in the tourist-focused Lumley and Aberdeen areas you'll rarely encounter these problems. But if you do head into the heart of town to explore the vibrant markets and varied historical sights, you'll soon find there's more to the city than initially meets the eye. Freetown is filthy and frantic, but you can't help loving it.

## ORIENTATION

Central Freetown, where most services are still found, is set out on a grid pattern with Siaka Stevens St as the main thoroughfare. Away from the central area, winding streets climb the surrounding hills. The main route east is Kissy Rd. Going west, the main route follows Sanders St and Main Motor Rd toward Aberdeen and Lumley, where most visitors spend their time. Note that Sir Samuel Lewis Rd is often called Aberdeen Rd because that is where it ends. Wilkinson Rd goes south all the way to Lumley Village.

## INFORMATION

### Cultural Centres

**British Council** (Map p504; ☎ 222223; www.britishcouncil.org/sierraleone; Tower Hill; ☏ 10am-6pm Mon, 9am-7pm Tue & Thu, 9am-6pm Wed & Fri, 10am-4pm Sat)

### Internet Access

**E-Zone** (Map pp502-3; 70D Wilkinson Rd; ☏ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 4-9pm Sun)

**Fidelity Globalcom** (Map p504; 19 Pultney St; ☏ 8.30am-10.30pm Mon-Thu, 24hr Fri & Sat)

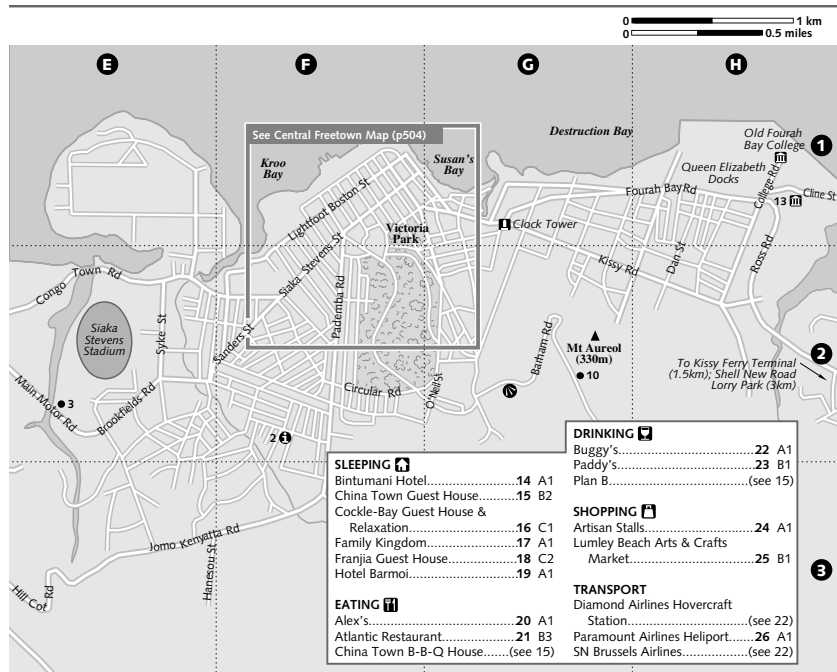
**Lumley Beach Dot Com** (Lumley Turntable; ☏ 24hr)

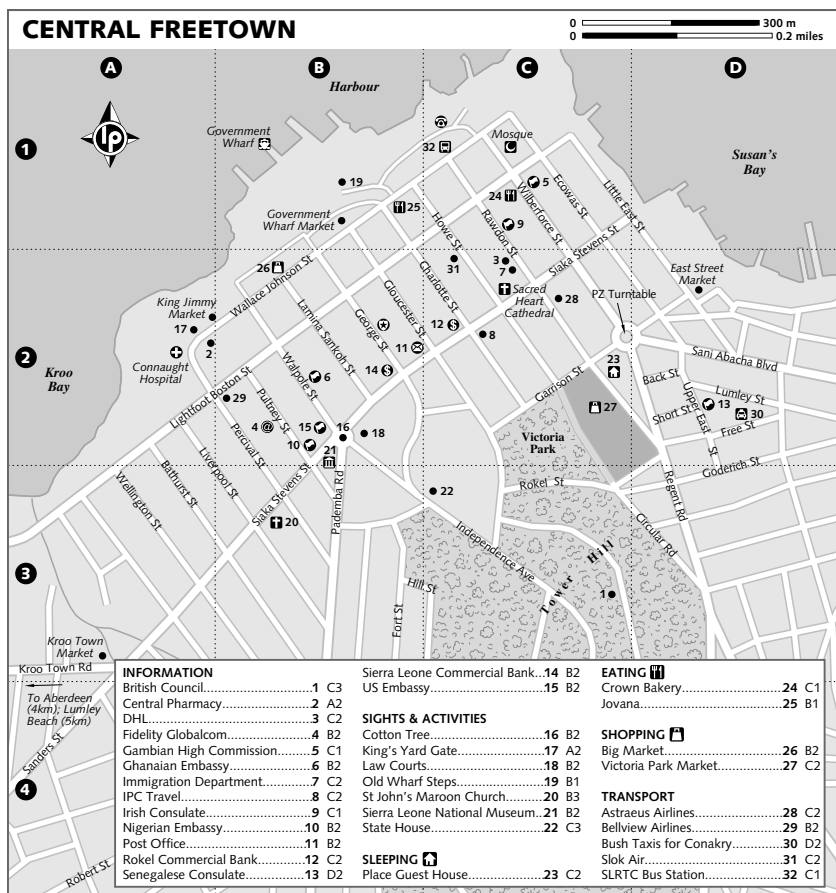
### Medical Services

**Choitram Memorial Hospital** (☎ 232598; Hill Station) is Freetown's best medical facility. **Central Pharmacy** (Map p504; ☎ 221735; 30 Wallace Johnson St) is reliable.

### Money

**Rokel Commercial Bank** (Map p504; 25/27 Siaka Stevens St) and **Sierra Leone Commercial Bank** (Map p504; 29/31 Siaka Stevens St) have full-service financial facilities, but the foreign-exchange bureaux (there are many on Rawdon and Wilberforce Sts) give better exchange rates. Rates at the





airport's exchange bureau are better than the banks, but a little below those in town.

## Post & Telephone

The main post office is on the corner of Siaka Stevens and Gloucester Sts. **DHL** (Map p504; ☎ 225215; 15 Rawdon St) has an office in the centre and another **branch** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 236156; 30 Main Motor Rd) near the stadium.

The Sierratel office, where you can buy phone-cards, is hidden away behind the bus station; but don't expect the phones in front of it to work.

## Tourist Information

**Conservation Society of Sierra Leone** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 229716; cssc\_03@yahoo.com; 2 Pyke St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Very helpful for nature-related questions.

**Tourist Information Office** (Map pp502-3;

☎ 236620; Lumley Beach Rd; ☎ 10am-7pm) Run by the National Tourist Board.

## Travel Agencies

**Facts Finding Tours** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 076-903675; factsfinding@yahoo.com) Kenneth Gbengba leads personalised bird- and wildlife-watching tours. He works out of the Tourist Information Office at Lumley Beach.

**IPC Travel** (Map p504; ☎ 221481; www.ipctravel.net; 22 Siaka Stevens St) Reliable for plane tickets and vehicle hire, IPC also offers tours.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Freetown has less of a crime problem than most other African capitals, but beware that petty thieves work the markets downtown,

especially Victoria Park, and Lumley Beach. The East End is rough as a badger, so watch your back in the light and stay out at night.

Beach boys and would-be gigolos are becoming more common on Lumley Beach, but they are tame compared to those in the Gambia.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The city's historic sites are modest, but interesting. The 500-year-old **Cotton Tree** (Map p504), under which slaves were sold and the first emancipated slaves gathered in 1787, casts its shadow on the **Sierra Leone National Museum** (Map p504; ☎ 223555; Siaka Stevens St; ☹ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri), which has a small collection of juju trinkets and historical artefacts, and the ornate **Law Courts** (Map p504). The **State House** (Map p504) is just up the hill, and the 1820 **St John's Maroon Church** (Map p504; Siaka Stevens St) is two blocks southwest.

The ancestors of nearly all present-day Krios passed through **King's Yard Gate** (Map p504; Wallace Johnson St), awaiting resettlement by the British. Many of these new arrivals climbed the nearby **Old Wharf Steps** (Map p504), sometimes erroneously called the Portuguese Steps. The area west of Tower Hill is a good place to gawp at interesting 19th-century, wood-framed **Krio houses**.

You need not be a rail fan to enjoy the **National Railroad Museum** (Map pp502-3; Cline St; admission free; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat), east of the centre in Clinetown, but it helps.

Freetown's beauty and potential show clearly when seen from above. The views are especially good from **Hill Station** and **Leicester Peak**. **Fourah Bay College** (Map pp502-3), one of the first universities in sub-Saharan Africa, sits atop Mt Aureol. You can follow the walking path through its forested botanical garden down to the waterfall you passed on the drive up.

**Lumley Beach** (Map pp502-3) on the edge of town is the busiest beach on the peninsula, but not the best. Development is coming fast, but for now it's mostly bamboo and thatch beer-shacks. The modest **Freetown Golf Club** (Map p504; ☎ 272956; Lumley Beach Rd; 18 holes US\$10) at the south end rents clubs.

## SLEEPING

**Place Guest House** (Map p504; ☎ 222608; 42 Rawdon St; s/d with bathroom US\$12/13.50, without bathroom US\$10/12, r with air-con US\$16; ☹) Perhaps the best

budget hotel in Sierra Leone, the Place is spotlessly clean and has power all night.

**Cockle-Bay Guest House & Relaxation** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 272789; 36 Sir Samuel Lewis Rd; r without bathroom US\$16, s/d with fan US\$23/28, d with air-con US\$32-37; ☹) A little noisy, but a good choice for beach-goers on a budget. Breakfast is included and prices are discounted midweek.

**Franjia Guest House** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 030-240426; 9K Carlton Carew Rd; r with fan & shared bathroom US\$20, s/d with air-con & bathroom US\$26/40; ☹) This very homey has eager-to-please staff. Breakfast is included.

**China Town Guest House** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 236664; 84 Lumley Beach Rd; s/d US\$65/85; ☹) These eight well-appointed, oriental-themed rooms lie just across the road from a quiet stretch of Lumley Beach.

**Hotel Barmoi** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 234933; 75C Cape Rd; s/d from US\$75/106; ☹ ☹ ☹) This small lodge has fine rooms and a great seaside location near the lighthouse. The restaurant is also good.

**Family Kingdom** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 236133; Aberdeen Beach Turntable; s US\$60, d US\$80-90, 2-room ste US\$120; ☹ ☹) The rooms are ordinary, but the real attractions are inside the compound, which has duikers roaming the grounds, and several schools-worth of playground equipment.

**Bintumani Hotel** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 233996; 11 Man of War Bay; r US\$138, ste US\$187-260; ☹ ☹ ☹) This hilltop tower is Freetown's most exclusive hotel. Facilities include a casino, two restaurants (Chinese and Western) and a pool large enough for a real swim.

## EATING

**Jovana** (Map p504; 16 Wallace Johnson St; mains US\$130-7.50; ☹ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Attracts locals for tasty African and European food.

**Alex's** (64 Cape Rd; mains US\$3.30-8.50; ☹ lunch Fri-Sun, dinner Tue-Sun) Freetown's loveliest dining spot looks west over Man of War Bay, from under the palm trees. Seafood is the speciality, but the large menu is global.

**China Town B-B-Q House** (Map pp502-3; 84 Lumley Beach Rd; mains US\$2.70-15; ☹ lunch & dinner) Eat Freetown's best Chinese food under a thatch roof on the beach.

**Crown Bakery** (Map p504; 5 Wilberforce St; mains US\$4.30-15; ☹ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This pricey expat favourite has a full menu spanning pancakes to *fajitas*.

**Atlantic Restaurant** (Map pp502-3; 30 Lumley Beach Rd; mains around US\$10; ☹ lunch Sun, dinner Tue-Sun) Good



fish dishes and a popular terrace at the southern end of Lumley Beach.

Street-food vendors work their candlelit stalls around PZ Turntable late into the night. **Paddy's** (Map pp502-3; 63 Sir Samuel Lewis Rd) serves good Indian food.

## DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

**Paddy's** (Map pp502-3; 63 Sir Samuel Lewis Rd) and **Bug-gy's** (Map pp502-3; 74 Cape Rd) are Freetown's most popular bars. Unusually tranquil for Freetown, **Plan B** (Map pp502-3; 84 Lumley Beach Rd) is a jazz-infused wine bar. **Old School Night Club** (Hill Station; admission US\$3.50-5) has Freetown's hottest dance floor. No place really gets hopping until midnight.

## SHOPPING

The best place you'll find for souvenir shopping is the **Big Market** (Basket Market; Map p504; Wallace Johnson St) downtown. It has all the usual textiles and woodcarvings you'll find in Lumley and Aberdeen, but also offers many traditional household goods. **Victoria Park Market** (Map p504; Garrison St), where you can find just about anything, is the best place for *gara* cloth, and the **Lumley Beach Arts & Crafts Market** (Map pp502-3; Lumley Beach Rd), behind the Tourist Information Office, has the widest selection of country cloth.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses leave around 7.30am from the **SLRTC bus station** (Map p504; Wallace Johnson St), though not necessarily every day for every town. They always depart full, so arrive around 6am to get a seat. Cities served are Bo, Kenema, Makeni, Kabala, Kono and Conakry (Guinea).

Bush taxis and *poda-podas* (minibuses) leave throughout the day from Shell New Rd Lorry Park on the far east side of town (from downtown catch a taxi on Goderich St),

except those going to Conakry, which park along Free St near Victoria Park Market.

## GETTING AROUND

Shared taxis and *poda-podas* cost US\$0.25 per ride. Taxis generally make short hops, while *poda-podas* run long distance, including downtown to Lumley and Aberdeen. Pay no attention to the route numbers painted on the side of the cars, just shout out your destination to each passing vehicle. Taxis don't have meters, so for private hire, bargain hard. A trip from downtown to Aberdeen should cost about US\$5.

# AROUND FREETOWN

## BEACHES

Some of the best beaches in Africa are found south of Freetown. The ocean is calm and warm, and most of the beaches are rip-tide free. Deep-sea fishing is superb and can easily be arranged in Freetown, as can whale-watching trips in October and November. *Poda-podas* run to all points except Kent, albeit infrequently.

One of the first really good stretches of sand is **Sussex Beach**, where you'll find the cosy **Franco's Dive Centre** (☎ 076-744406; r US\$60; 📶). Have a meal (excellent Italian and seafood around US\$5) here and you can sleep on the beach for US\$0.70.

Halfway down the peninsula, at **River No 2 Beach** (probably the choicest beach of them all, featuring brilliant white sands backed by thickly forested, wildlife-filled hills), you'll find the community-run **River No 2 Development Association** (☎ 033-365934; camp sites US\$1.70, r ind breakfast US\$40, seafood US\$6.50) has large rooms right on the beach and will arrange scenic boat trips. Entry for the day (US\$1.70)

## THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

The easiest way to town from Lungi Airport is with **Paramount Airlines helicopters** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 076-621041; one way US\$40) and **Diamond Airlines Hovercraft** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 076-624786; one way US\$30). Both drop you off in Aberdeen, and time their trips to coincide with flight arrivals and departures, though check a day in advance because they don't connect with every flight.

The other way from the airport is to take a shared taxi (US\$0.70) to the ferry terminal at Tagrin. A car ferry (US\$0.50 for passengers) crosses the river five or six times a day, but if you don't want to wait you can take one of the *pam-pams* (big boats) for US\$0.70, or the less-crowded speedboats for US\$1.70. These are wet landings, but men wait to carry passengers to the boats for a small tip. Chartering a taxi all the way to Aberdeen costs about US\$17.

includes the use of umbrellas, thatch huts and showers.

Just down the shore is **Tokeh Beach** where you'll find **Baam Tokeh** (bungalows US\$20), a small, laid-back hang-out with nightly bonfires. You can pitch a tent on the beach for a song.

Ask someone in **York**, an interesting Krio village, to show you the caves where slaves stayed before being loaded onto ships. From nearby **York Beach** you can walk around the rocky bay to **Black Johnson Beach**. At the end of the peninsula is **Kent**, with its little horseshoe beach and ruined fort, and around the bend, at the ramshackle fishing town of **Tombo**, you can catch boats across the bay to rarely visited **Shenge** (US\$2.70) and **Bonthe** (US\$3.30), where you can have miles of white sand all to yourself.

## BANANA ISLANDS

Diving and snorkelling are good near these islands off the peninsula's southern tip. The best way to get to the Bananas is to hire a local fishing boat at Tokeh Village (expect to pay around US\$60, which includes a lavish seafood meal). Kent is closer, but you probably won't save money leaving from here because the fishermen aren't used to taking travellers out there. Near **Dublin** village are some interesting ruins of an 1881 church and slave centre.

## BUNCE ISLAND

This intriguing destination is on the Sierra Leone River, some 15km from Freetown. A British fort was established here in 1663, but the atmospheric ruins are of a second fort from where various European powers traded in camwood (used to make dye), ivory and slaves. Before it was shut down in 1808, some 50,000 men, women and children were shipped off into exile, including the Gullah people of South Carolina.

## TACUGAMA CHIMPANZEE RESERVE

Near Sugar Loaf Mountain you can watch rescued and rehabilitated chimps in this great little **private reserve** (☎ 224098; admission US\$5; ☼ 10am-5.30pm). A couple of waterfalls are within walking distance. Shared taxis (US\$5) run from Freetown to **Regent**, an interesting little village with many old Krio houses and churches, and from there it's a 3km uphill walk. Chartering a car round trip from Regent will cost around US\$5.

# NORTHERN SIERRA LEONE

## MAKENI

☎ 052 / pop 85,000

Makeni, the quiet capital of Northern Province and a former RUF headquarters, is a market town for the surrounding villages. Women sell the region's distinctive coiled *blai* baskets in the shade of the cotton tree in Independence Sq and across from Makeni Central Mosque, one of the most beautiful in the country. Any boy can show you the path up the back of **Wusum Hill**, which can be climbed in about an hour. Other peaks north of town, along the road to Kabala, are just begging for rock hounds to break out the ropes.

**MJ Motel** (☎ 076-139945; 14 Freetown Hwy; s/d US\$20/27; ☼) is Makeni's best lodging by far. **Buya's Motel** (r with/without bathroom US\$8.50/5) across the street is dumpier, but it's the best bet for those on a budget. Several simple restaurants in the centre serve cheap *chop*.

Bush taxis run to many destinations including Freetown (US\$4.60, three hours), Kamakwie (US\$4, four hours) and Bo (US\$5, four hours), plus the SLRTC buses to Kono and Kabala will drop passengers here.

## OUTAMBA-KILIMI NATIONAL PARK

Sierra Leone's only **national park** (admission US\$2.50) is a beautiful, peaceful place. The main Outamba section consists of rolling hills, grasslands, flood plains, rainforests and rivers, which you explore by canoe and footpath since there are no roads. You can track elephants on their own trails and paddle past hippos (sightings almost guaranteed in the dry season), and no matter where you go you'll see many of the 260 bird species. These excursions cost (US\$3.30) per person plus (US\$1.70) for the guide.

Cosy thatch **huts** (US\$3.30) sit right on the riverbank, and someone will cook food if you bring it. Without your own transport you'll need to hire a motorcycle (about US\$15 return) in Kamakwie, the nearest sizable town, for the 32km trip, as the final stretch of entrance road is too rough for cars.

## MOUNT BINTUMANI

Loma Mansa, as Sierra Leone's highest peak is also known, rises 1945m. In clear weather, views from the summit are excellent. The **Loma**

**Mountains Forest Reserve** protects the highland rainforest covering the lower slopes. There are chimpanzees and several species of monkey here, and you have a fair chance of seeing elephants and bongos as you approach the mountain. In the rivers, you may be lucky enough to see pygmy hippopotami, dwarf crocodiles and rufous fishing-owls; they are all endangered species. Above 1500m the forest gives way to grassland where you can spot baboons, duikers, and even buffaloes.

The most scenic and wildlife-rich approach to the summit is from the west, either from Firawa or, more commonly, **Yifin** (from where it's at least a four-day walk). The route from **Kurubonla** can be done in two days if you move fast. Pay your respects to the chief in any of these villages and he'll help you find a guide, which is necessary because many paths are overgrown. The climb isn't technical, but you need to be self-sufficient.

## SOUTHERN SIERRA LEONE

### BO

☎ 032 / pop 167,000

Sierra Leone's second-largest city, Bo is a lively town in the heart of Mende country, but there isn't really much to see or do.

It's a little rough around the edges, but centrally located **Hotel Sir Milton** (☎ 032493; 6 Kissy Town Rd; s/d US\$12.50/16.50, r with air-con US\$21.50; ☼) is good for the price. Filling Lebanese and African food can be found at many small restaurants near the Milton, and street stalls set up around here at night.

Bush taxis to Freetown (US\$5.50, six hours) depart frequently each morning from Maxwell Khobe Park near the centre, as does the daily SLRTC bus. This is also the spot to catch taxis to Potoru (US\$5, three hours). To reach Freetown in the afternoon you'll probably need to use New London Park on the highway. Kenema (US\$2, one hour) and Makeni (US\$5, four hours) bush taxis use the market.

### KENEMA

☎ 042 / pop 138,000

Kenema, the provinces' most prosperous town, is a busy trade centre for coffee, cacao, timber and, most visibly, diamonds. The main artery, Hangha Rd, is a crush of Lebanese

diamond merchants. Befriend one and they may let you eyeball raw stones or connect you with someone who will show you a mine. The **Kambui Hills Forest Reserve**, just outside town, is a good place for hiking and bird-watching. Get information at the **District Forestry Office** (☎ 420059) at the end of Maxwell Khobe St.

It's overpriced, but the **Sinava Guest House** (☎ 076-770270; 9 Blama Rd; s/d US\$33/40; ☼) is the best hotel in town; competition is coming, however. The very friendly **Ruby Motel** (☎ 076-784638; 20 Mambu St; r with/without bathroom US\$15/5) is out of the centre and hard to find, so hop on a *moto-taxi* to get there the first time. Convivial owners and tasty food, a mix of Lebanese and African, make the **Capitol Restaurant** (51 Hangha Rd; mains from US\$1.60; ☼ breakfast, lunch & dinner) popular.

Bush taxis to Bo (US\$2, one hour), Potoru (US\$2.70, four hours), Freetown (US\$7, seven hours) and the Liberian border (US\$13.50, nine hours) depart from the taxi park on Maxwell Khobe St. The road south toward Monrovia is extraordinarily bad. SLRTC buses to Freetown depart every morning from the bus station in the centre.

### TIWAI ISLAND WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Set on a small island in the Moa River, Tiwai has one of the highest concentrations of primates on the continent and they are often seen on the trails. And, many animals that are rare elsewhere thrive here, including chimpanzees, pygmy hippopotamis, river otters and white-breasted guinea fowl. If you don't have a car, the friendly staff in the **park office** (☎ 076-922792) in Potoru, a nearby town, will get you to the island for a fair price. Park entrance is US\$5 (US\$10 to stay the night in their tents) and the various guided tours range from US\$3.30 to US\$6.60.

## SIERRA LEONE DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Freetown is full of classy, comfortable and costly hotels, and more will open soon on the peninsular beaches. There are also many budget choices in the capital, but few good ones. Upcountry, most large towns have several hotels, though few that will satisfy those needing plenty of creature comforts.

## PRACTICALITIES

- Sierra Leone uses British weights and measures.
- Electricity is 230V/50Hz and plugs have three large pins, like the UK, or sometimes three round pins.
- *Awoko* and *Concord Times* are two of the most respected newspapers, though the humorous *Peep* is more popular.
- Magazines like *Newsweek* and *Africa Week* are sold at supermarkets.
- Hardly anyone watches the government-owned SLBS TV station except when they show music videos: the American dramas and Nigerian soap operas on the privately owned ABC are far more popular.
- The BBC World Service is heard on 94.3FM, while Democracy (98.1FM) and SKYY (106FM) play the hits.

The cheapest are usually grubby and cater to short-term guests.

Always request discounts for stays of more than one night, as you'll often get them. Also note that same-sex couples, regardless of whether they are a 'couple', usually cannot share a room. Westerners are sometimes exempted from this rule, but don't count on it.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Sierra Leone is one of the safest destinations in West Africa, though it pays to remain vigilant with your valuables.

Except for in Bo and Kenema, electricity is either sporadic or nonexistent, and even these towns suffer occasional shut-offs at the end of the dry season. Just about all hotels have generators, though most budget places only run them from around 7pm to 1am.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Sierra Leone Embassies & Consulates

Sierra Leone has embassies in both bordering countries; see the relevant chapters for details.

**Germany** (☎ 0228-352001; Rheinallee 20, 53173 Bonn)

**Netherlands** (☎ 35-6213504; G Van Amstelstraat 1, 1213 CG Hilversum)

**UK** (☎ 020-7287 9884; www.slhc-uk.org.uk; 245 Oxford St, W1D 2LX London)

**USA** (☎ 202-939-9261; www.embassyofsierraleone.org; 1701 19th St NW, 20009 Washington, DC)

## Embassies & Consulates in Sierra Leone

All of the following are in Freetown:

**Gambia** (Map p504; ☎ 225191; 6 Wilberforce St;

☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Thu, 9am-12.30pm Fri)

**Germany** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 231350;

germemb@sierratel.sl; 3 Middle Hill Station, Wilberforce)

**Ghana** (Map p504; ☎ 223461; 13 Walpole St)

**Guinea** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 232496; 6 Carlton Carew Rd)

**Ireland** (Map p504; ☎ 222017; 8 Rawdon St)

**Liberia** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 230991; 2 Spur Rd, Wilberforce)

**Mali** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 230284; 40 Wilkinson Rd; ☎ 9am-3.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-3.30pm Fri)

**Nigeria** (Map p504; ☎ 224229; 37 Siaka Stevens St;

☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Fri)

**Senegal** (Map p504; ☎ 222948; Upper East St; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat)

**UK** (Map pp502-3; ☎ 232961; bh@sierratel.sl; 6 Spur Rd) Assists French nationals.

**USA** (Map p504; ☎ 226481; http://freetown.usembassy.gov; cnr Walpole & Siaka Stevens Sts) Soon moving to Hill Station.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The country goes kite-crazy on Easter Monday, and Lumley Beach is packed with free-flying families. Independence Day's Lantern Parade, an evening procession of illuminated floats, has recently been revived.

## HOLIDAYS

As well as holidays listed on p1106, these are the public holidays in Sierra Leone:

**1 January** New Year's Day

**March/April** Easter

**27 April** Independence Day

**25 December** Christmas Day

**26 December** Boxing Day

## INTERNET ACCESS

Freetown has plenty of internet cafés with good high-speed connections; most charge US\$1.70 per hour. Access in the provinces is rare and painfully slow.

## MAPS

Street vendors around Crown Bakery in Freetown sell *The Road Map of Sierra Leone* and *Freetown* by Oxford Cartographers for around US\$4. Outside Africa you can buy the International Travel Map series, which is better for country coverage, but doesn't have Freetown. Both are outdated.

## MONEY

The most easily exchangeable currencies in Sierra Leone are US dollars, UK pounds and euros. Large denominations will get the best rates. You can't pay with a credit card anywhere, but some Sierra Leone Commercial Bank and Rokel Bank branches will give cash advances on Visa cards. ATMs only work if you have a local bank account. Foreign-exchange bureaux (and street traders, though avoid them unless a friend makes the introduction) offer better rates than the banks for cash and travellers cheques. There are banks and foreign-exchange bureaux in some up-country towns, but you'll get better rates at places in Freetown.

## POST & TELEPHONE

Sierra Leone's regular post, including poste restante, is unreliable, though the separate express service seems to work. DHL is a safer option.

The easiest way to make a phone call is at the countless small telecentres. Calls to the USA, UK or Australia cost US\$0.80 per minute. It's cheaper by about half to use the Serratel phonecards, but finding a phone to use them on can be a chore.

Mobile phones are common and the service is good. If you have a GSM phone you can buy a SIM card for US\$3.30 to US\$5 from one of the five service providers, and then use prepaid top-up cards.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

The **National Tourist Board** ([www.welcometosierra Leone.org](http://www.welcometosierra Leone.org)) can be helpful, but the best source of pre-departure information is [www.visitsierra Leone.org](http://www.visitsierra Leone.org).

## VISAS

Everyone from outside Ecowas countries requires a visa. Tourist visas cost between US\$40 and US\$100 depending on your nationality. Download application forms at [www.slhc-uk.org.uk](http://www.slhc-uk.org.uk). Visas are available at the airport and land borders, but it is recommended you get one before arrival to avoid any hassles, as this is a new policy.

## Visa Extensions

Visas for Sierra Leone can be easily extended at the **Immigration Department** (☎ 223034; cnr Rawdon St & Siaka Stevens St; ☎ 10am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) in Freetown.

## Visas for Onward Travel

One-month, single-entry visas for Guinea cost around US\$35 and three-month, multiple-entry visas cost double. Most nationalities can get a three-month, single-entry visa to Liberia for US\$75. For both you need one photo, and the visa should be ready in 15 minutes.

## VOLUNTEERING

The **Forum for African Women Educationalists** (☎ 227076; [www.fawe.org](http://www.fawe.org)), which aims to reduce gender inequalities in education, has earned respect among locals, and volunteers have reported wonderful experiences. Volunteers looking for other opportunities can email [jobsearchsl@visitsierraleone.org](mailto:jobsearchsl@visitsierraleone.org).

# TRANSPORT IN SIERRA LEONE

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Air connections to Freetown continue to expand. **SN Brussels** (☎ 236445; [www.flysn.com](http://www.flysn.com)) has two flights a week from Brussels. **Astraeus** (☎ 228405; [www.flyastraesus.com](http://www.flyastraesus.com)) flies twice a week from London Gatwick, and **Bellview** (☎ 227311; [www.flybellviewair.com](http://www.flybellviewair.com)) thrice from Heathrow. Return flights from London with Astraeus and Bellview usually cost about US\$900, while SN Brussels charges more for better service.

Bellview connects Freetown to Accra (Ghana), Dakar (Senegal), Douala (Cameroon), Banjul (Gambia), and Lagos (Nigeria); **Slok Air** (☎ 076-770702; [www.slokaairinternational.com](http://www.slokaairinternational.com)) to Accra, Banjul and Monrovia (Liberia); **Gambia International** (☎ 221481; [www.gia.gn](http://www.gia.gn)) to Banjul and Dakar; and **GR-AVIA** (☎ 221481) to Conakry. **Kenya Airways** (☎ 221481; [www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) connects to Nairobi (Kenya) twice a week.

### DEPARTURE TAX

The airport departure tax is US\$40. Some airlines include it in the price of the ticket, but most do not.

## Land

### GUINEA

The main overland route to Guinea is via Pamelap. Bush taxis to Conakry (US\$10, seven hours) run regularly, and there is an SLRTC

bus (US\$13, seven hours) on Monday and Thursday. Roads on the Kamakwie–Kindia and Kabala–Faranah routes are in bad shape and taxis only run a couple of times a week. Get local advice before using either crossing between Kailahun and Guéckédou as we've heard reports of hassles from Sierra Leone border officials.

### **LIBERIA**

The only practical route to Liberia is at the Mano River Bridge by Bo (Waterside). From Freetown to Monrovia takes about two days in the dry season, and you'll need to change taxis in Kenema and at the border. The crossings from Zimmi, Koindu and Buedu are also via horrible roads and have very little traffic. Check the security situation before using any of these crossings.

### **Sea**

There is talk of restarting the ferry between Freetown and Conakry. Inquire at Government Wharf.

## **GETTING AROUND**

### **Air**

From little Hastings airport just outside Freetown, **Eagle Air** (☎ 228405) flies to Yengema

(US\$100, two hours and 10 minutes), stopping in Bo (US\$70, 50 minutes) and Kenema (US\$80, one hour and 20 minutes) on both the outbound and return trip. The 17-seat plane departs from Freetown at 8.30am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Baggage allowance is just 10kg; it's US\$1.50 per subsequent kilogram.

### **Car**

Car hire is expensive (starting at around US\$75; much more if you're heading upcountry), but don't choose a company only on the price; ask about the terms too. Kilometres will always be unlimited and a driver included, but fuel costs and after-hours charges vary. Reliable businesses include **Dial A Ride** (☎ 241934) and **IPC Travel** (☎ 221481).

### **Local Transport**

Bush taxis and *poda-podas* link all major and many minor towns, though, except for departures to and from Freetown (and between Bo and Kenema), traffic is usually pretty sparse, especially on Sunday. Government-run Sierra Leone Road Transport Corporation (SLRTC) buses charge the same as taxis and are more comfortable, but they are slower and at best have just one departure a day.